

How to "Read" a Picture

a quick 60 minute guide to
understanding and describing
artwork

Also known as Visual Literacy

Visual Imagery

They say pictures are worth a thousand words.

So why is it so hard to explain what is in a picture? Where are those thousand words, eh?

Why does it seem the art can express so much more than just a photo of an object?

Visual Images are created by artists and photographers to express ideas. What clues do the artists give us to help us understand what they mean?

Visual Images are created to cause a shiver of understanding, emotion or simply appreciation of beauty. This shiver is called an **aesthetic experience**. A viewer feels it when they appreciate the artwork as more than just a representation of an object.

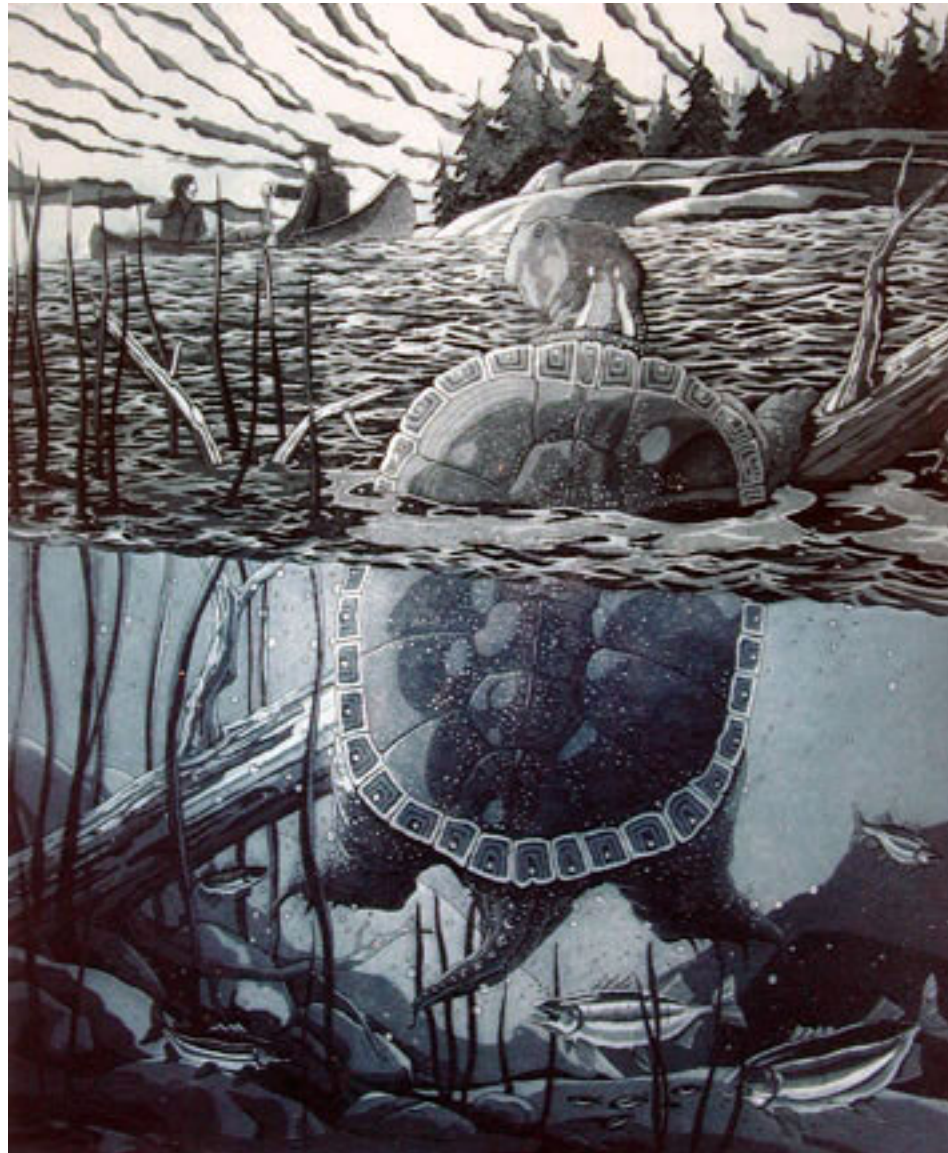
Aesthetic Experience: a feeling of understanding, emotion or appreciation of beauty

Feel good when you understand the second level. The artist means you to recognize more than just two planters in the photo on the right.

Take a second look at this visual image.



Greg Payce, *Passion sur Raison ou Raison sur Passion?* 2008



This work is an example of **point of view**. Where are you in this picture. If you were taking the photo would you be underwater with the fish. Yes you would.

Point of View

Artists use Bird's Eye View, Ants eye view and even

the view of the fish in the pond by the turtle.

NBA sports photographers love to take shots of basketball players from an ants eye view. Why? Well if you are looking at Shaquille O'Neal from an ants eye view he will appear even taller than he is. That adds drama and excitement to the photographer's work.

If the artist wants the viewer to be removed from the action the point of view can be set back. This gives the viewer a good look at more detail from further away. Perhaps the artist wants the viewer to smell and feel a rose petal- the point of view may be in your face close up.

Artists make decisions about their work
so that it will impact on you, the viewer.

Elements of Art

Elements are building blocks used by artists to create. The elements used are:

Colour, Value, Line, Shape, Space, Texture, Form and Chroma

Colours have emotional and symbolic qualities

The **warm reds** of the people connect them as one family. Warm colours represent love and feelings of togetherness. Even the background blue is a warm tone rather than cool. The family is also connected physically with **lines** to gather all four figures into one overall shape. The **dark lines** create **emphasis** as they **contrast** with the colours of the shapes and the background. Contrast helps the shapes to show up with pride and drama.

Norval Morriseau, *Family*, 2005



Value refers to how dark or light a colour is. Value can also refer to black and white tones.

Works with a lot of difference in value are called high contrast. example on the right is high contrast of values. Works with less difference in value have low contrast.

Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*
1981-1983



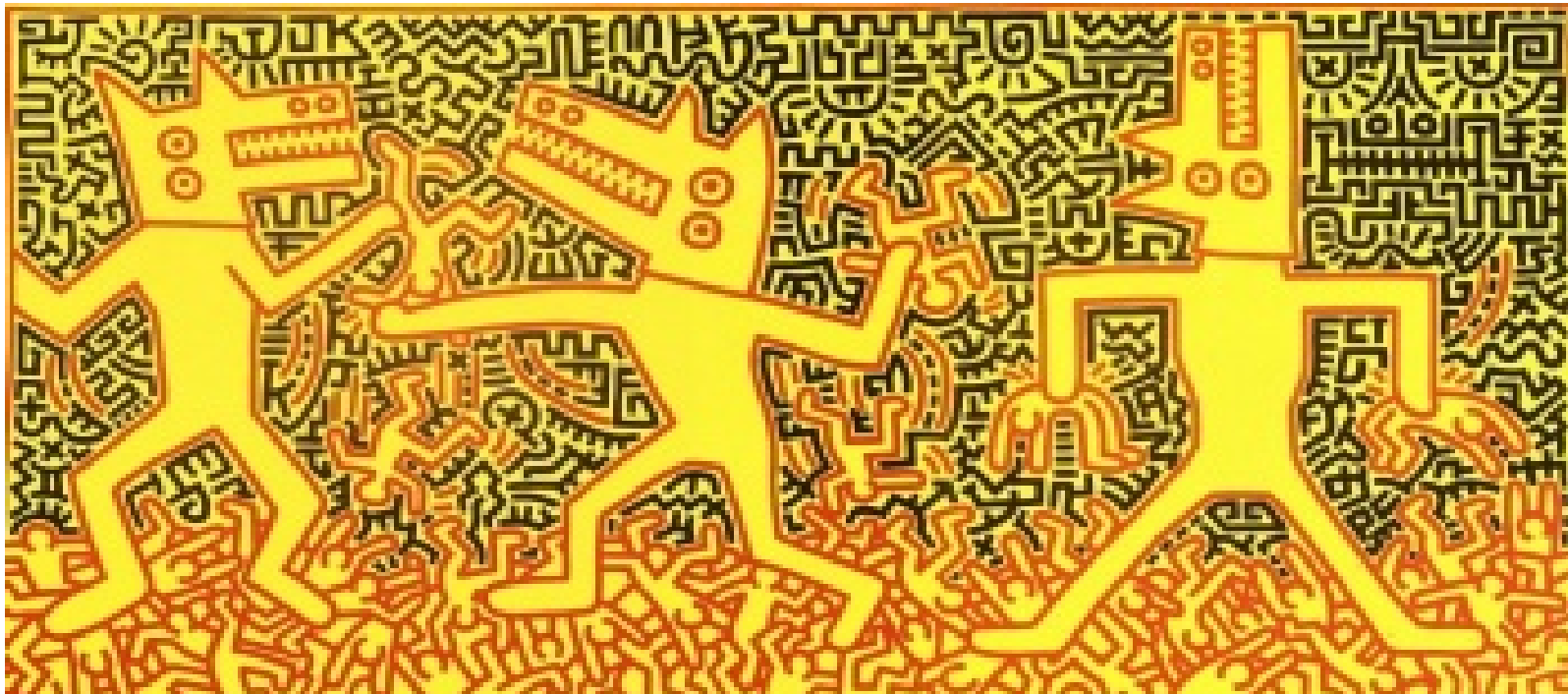
Shape

Shape is two dimensional. Shapes have width and length. They appear flat. A shape is space surrounded by a boundary such as a line or a colour. Shapes can be divided into three categories:

Geometric shapes are technical, mathematical and hard edged.

Freeform shapes are unbalanced and can be open ended and combine straight and curved lines. Clouds and flames are freeform.

Natural shapes are those found in living organisms such as leaves and trees. What Shapes dominate this work? Look twice. Maybe three times.



Form is 3 dimensional. They are objects that have length, width and depth. Artists indicate depth by using shading, and perspective. Sculpture uses forms that can viewed from all angles

M.C. Escher uses shading to create form on a page of paper.

M.C. Escher, *Drawing Hands*, 1948



Louise Bourgeois uses form to allow people to wander in, under and around her spider sculpture.

Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 1999



Line

is any mark made on a surface by a moving point, such as the tip of a pencil or a paint brush.

Lines run in different directions, can be sharp or soft and can be used to communicate emotion.

Try this:

Hold a pencil in your fist. Grind the lead into the paper and scar the page repeatedly with harsh, sharp angled lines.

Observe what you have done. Is it happy light and airy? Just the kind of line to draw Tinker Bell with? Well only if she is on steroids and having road rage!

Texture

is how something feels to the touch. Visual texture is what artists use to show the appearance of the touch sensation.

This fur cup is an example of actual texture. It is a sculpture of a cup made of fur. It may make you want to gag.

Meret Oppenheim. *Object (Le Dejeuner En Fourrure)*, 1936



Space

is the area around shapes and forms in a work of art.

Van Gogh has used swirling patterns of line and colour to create a shimmering turbulent sky in the negative space of the painting *Starry Night*. His positive space is taken up with the objects of the trees in the foreground and the village and hills in the mid and background.

